

***“Oh, sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among the peoples!” (Psalm 96:1-3).<sup>1</sup>***

These words are a portion of a thanksgiving song appointed by King David<sup>2</sup> declaring to all mankind that the God of Israel is the sovereign king and LORD over all the nations. As such, it is the duty, joy, and privilege of all of God’s redeemed people to tell others of His works and His salvation. While the charge to declare God’s salvation to all the nations was announced in this song by the king around 1000 BC, the corpus of the Word of God speaks of this mission theme long before and long after David’s lifetime. In biblical theology, the theme of missions has a significant trajectory from the Book of Genesis to the Book of Revelation. While many today focus exclusively on a New Testament theology of missions, this paper will serve as a reminder that a biblical theology of missions is founded upon the unity of all sixty-six books of the Bible. Authors Andreas J. Kostenberger and Peter T. O’Brien provide a clear reason for this fact. They write, “For Scripture is united by one primary pervading purpose: tracing God’s unfolding plan of redemption. It everywhere assumes that *this God acts coherently and purposefully in history*.”<sup>3</sup> The Old Testament revelation will show that a framework for missions existed before the New Testament Church.

The primary objective of this paper is to provide an Old Testament overview of a biblical theology of missions. This overview is built upon a foundational understanding that the Word of God is united from Genesis to Revelation and reveals that the Creator of Heaven and Earth has

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this paper will use the English Standard Version for all Scripture references.

<sup>2</sup> I Chronicles chapters 15 and 16 provide an historical account of the Ark of the Covenant returned to Jerusalem and placed inside a tent prepared by King David. Songs of praise and thanksgiving accompanied this important event of which the verses quoted in Psalm 96 are a part.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 20

purposed to reconcile sinners from all nations to Himself. We shall see that the foundation of missions is based upon the Triune God who takes the initiative to restore fallen humanity through the long-awaited and promised Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. While the New Testament Scriptures provide many missionary patterns and examples, the foundations for this work are found earlier in God's revelation. We shall also see that this glorious thread of truth shines brighter and brighter throughout the redemptive biblical and historical record. This paper shall strive to show that any accurate interpretation of the history of salvation must, of necessity, focus on God's saving work and the centrality of redemption found in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> This is, in fact, the very foundation for the activity of missions. "The Bible is concerned with a specific history of God's actions. It is a history under the sovereign control of God. Thus, evangelical biblical theology is frequently associated with redemptive or salvation history."<sup>5</sup> The Old Testament Scriptures reveal God's active redemption plan and thus assist us in establishing the framework for the great commission of the New Testament Church.

## **Framework for Missions**

The origin of the task of missions is rooted in the Bible's first book. There, we find the Creator of heaven and earth making man "in his own image,"<sup>6</sup> thus making man enjoy communion and fellowship with Himself. However, man rebelled against the Creator and incurred the dire consequences of a severed relationship with his God. Yet God, abundant in mercy, even when pronouncing judgment upon rebellion, provided a glimmer of hope. While the fall into the sin of mankind necessitated a need for the work of missions, God Himself, by the

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<sup>4</sup> This is the essence of *Heilsgeschichte*, or "salvation history." This term is usually attributed to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Lutheran theologian J.C.K. von Hofmann.

<sup>5</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 57

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1:27

promise that the “woman’s seed would bruise the serpent’s head” (Gen. 3:15),<sup>7</sup> took the initiative to ensure a means of redemption for fallen man.

In the early Genesis account, man repeatedly falls deeper into sin. Yet despite a hardened sinful heart, and in conjunction with God’s righteous judgment, God remains faithful to mankind by remembering his saving promise. The saving of Noah and his family demonstrates God’s desire to keep his rebellious creation from destruction. “But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your son’s wives with you” (Genesis 6:18). Kostenberger and O’Brien write, “According to Genesis 6:18-21 God saves this family and a representative group of animals, birds, and reptiles, to ‘keep’ his covenant with them, a statement that refers to the plan which God brought into being at creation (cf. 9:1-7).”<sup>8</sup> God’s covenant with Noah extends the redemptive promise in the garden. O. Palmer Robertson, writing on the covenant of preservation between God and Noah, reminds us of the foundational redemptive purposes. “God does not relate to his creation through Noah apart from his ongoing redemption program. Even the provision concerning the ordering of seasons must be understood in the framework of God’s purposes respecting redemption.”<sup>9</sup>

Another critical and foundational framework for a biblical theology of missions, also revealed early in the book of Genesis, is the Abrahamic covenant. A.J. Kostenberger expresses something of this covenant’s centrality and its implications for missions. “The Abrahamic covenant provides the framework for God’s dealings with humanity in the rest of biblical history, which culminates in the new covenant instituted by Abraham’s ‘seed,’ Jesus Christ (Gal.

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<sup>7</sup> Proto-Evangelion

<sup>8</sup> Kostenberger and O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Missions* 27,28

<sup>9</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1980), 111

3:16).”<sup>10</sup> Here we find a tremendous promise! God, speaking to Abram declared, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3). It is essential to point out that in the Genesis narrative, God repeated these words of great promise four additional times!<sup>11</sup> Commenting on the repetition of the promise in the book of Genesis, Eric Wright states, “The repetition signals God’s intent to use the nation that would be raised up from Abraham to become a blessing to all the ethnic peoples of the earth.”<sup>12</sup>

One might ask what the blessings are and the extent of the blessings that God promised Abraham. The answer is nothing less than the gospel of the grace of God extended to all who believe! The Apostle asserts this tremendous and wonderful reality in the New Covenant age. Writing to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul states, “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith” (Romans 4:13). “That is why it depends on faith, so that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations...” (Romans 4:17,17a). So here we find God’s great concern and blessing to the nations of which Abraham would be the spiritual father. It is important to recognize the historical context of this covenant. Coming on the heels of the sinful activities of mankind found in Genesis 3 -11, in Genesis chapter 12, God again takes the initiative to provide a means of spiritual and eternal blessings **for all the nations** of the earth. While no doubt Abraham could not have understood the full extent of the blessings that would come upon him

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<sup>10</sup> A.J. Kostenberger, “Mission,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 663

<sup>11</sup> See Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; and 28:14.

<sup>12</sup> Eric E. Wright, *A Practical Theology of Missions: Dispelling the Mystery; Recovering the Passion* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2010), 53

and all the nations, the promise so early in the biblical record reveals God's heart for the nations and, thus, a rich foundation for mission activity. Graeme Goldsworthy makes an important statement while commenting on God's promise to Abraham. He writes, "The earlier expressions point to things beyond themselves that are greater than the meaning that would have been perceived by those receiving these earlier expressions."<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that these early expressions of promise by God to Abraham had a far greater purpose than could have first been understood! The progressive nature of revelation is required to uncover the depths and extent of these promises that one day would find fulfillment in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Once again, one can surmise laying a framework for the work of missions.

Along with God's covenantal promises to Noah and Abraham, the Bible's Exodus narrative serves a central and vital role in building a framework for a theology of missions. God planned to deliver Israel out of slavery in Egypt to establish a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). God makes it clear that Israel will be His "treasured possession" (Exod. 19:5) even though "all the earth is mine" (Exod. 19:5). This verse (v5) is quite significant in the history of redemption. Kostenberger and O'Brien highlight this by stating, "It carries the main weight of proclamation and sets forth the divine motivation for Yahweh's exodus redemption from Egypt: Israel is called because the whole world ("earth") is the object of Yahweh's care."<sup>14</sup>

Israel's calling to be a holy nation had profound implications for all nations. While it is true that Israel repeatedly violated the Sinai covenant, it was nonetheless the purpose of God that Israel serve as a model to all nations. They were to declare that Yahweh is Lord over all the earth! Israel was always intended to be priests of a holy nation! Eric Wright makes a helpful

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<sup>13</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan; The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 123

<sup>14</sup> Kostenberger and O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Missions* 33

comment regarding their role as priests. He writes, “Priests occupied a mediator between God and other people. The whole nation was to exhibit, through its holy worship, this priestly or mediatorial function. They were to be the vehicle through which God would call the nations to worship and obedience and shower them with blessings.”<sup>15</sup>

While there is little debate on the requirement for Israel to be holy to God and thus serve as a godly example to the nations, there is no shortage of discussion about whether Israel was called to be an active witness to the surrounding countries. The question is often phrased like this: what was Israel’s mission to the surrounding nations? In other words, did God give Israel the task of missionary outreach? Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. strongly supports the understanding that Israel was called to a mission mandate. He writes, “The call for a mission mandate and emphasis in the O.T. cannot be overlooked, if readers are to do justice to the basic claims and message of the Old Testament. The message of the O.T. was/is both universal in its scope and international in its range.”<sup>16</sup> Some theologians take exception to Professor Kaiser’s view of Israel’s mission participation within the Old Covenant. Kostenberger and O’Brien state, “There is no suggestion in the Old Testament that Israel should have engaged in ‘cross-cultural’ or foreign mission.”<sup>17</sup> In this line of reasoning, Israel, the recipient of God’s blessings, was meant to exalt God in life and worship. Through their godly lifestyle, the expectation was that the nations would be attracted to the God of Israel.

It is not the objective of this paper to comment on this controversy other than to acknowledge the debate in the context of understanding an Old Testament framework for missions. Regardless of which understanding of the issue is adopted, the Apostle Peter, writing

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<sup>15</sup> Wright, *A Practical Theology of Missions: Dispelling the Mystery; Recovering the Passion* 54

<sup>16</sup> Kaiser, Walter, Jr. “The Great Commission in the Old Testament.”

[http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_ljfm/13\\_1\\_PDFs/01\\_Kaiser.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_ljfm/13_1_PDFs/01_Kaiser.pdf) (accessed January 23, 2015)

<sup>17</sup> Kostenberger and O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Missions* 35

under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, states the following; “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, *that you may proclaim the excellencies* of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (I Peter 2:9). Peter is obviously reflecting in the Word of God to Exodus 19. In the context of his letter, Peter addresses believers in Christ who are “elect exiles.” The responsibility is to proclaim the excellencies of God. One might ask whether the faithful believers in the old covenant would do anything less than proclaim the excellence of their God. The answer is most certainly no! No doubt the words quoted earlier in Psalm 96 to “declare His glory” would have been the heart’s desire of the Israelite who, by saving faith, knew his Redeemer! These same believers, living a life of holy obedience, would in themselves witness to the power of God. “Holiness would prepare the nation to be God’s ambassadors to the whole earth.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Davidic Dynasty**

“When your days are fulfilled, and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:12,13).

These words of the LORD, spoken through the prophet Nathan, assure King David that his kingdom will endure beyond his earthly life. An eschatological hope is established that ultimately would find fulfillment in the promised Messiah. This promise is vital to the history of salvation and the foundations of mission activity. The context for these words of promise was King David’s desire to build an appropriate house for the ark of God. Instead, God determined that He would build David’s “house” and his kingdom would reign forever (dynasty). This passage has critical value in unfolding God’s plan of salvation. The “offspring,” or literally

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<sup>18</sup> Wright, *A Practical Theology of Missions: Dispelling the Mystery; Recovering the Passion* 54

“seed,” is reminiscent of the early promise of the “seed” of the woman in Genesis 3:15. It is also reminiscent, indeed reinforcement, of the covenant with Abraham!

The Apostles linked II Samuel chapter seven to the Lord Jesus Christ in the New Testament Church age. Robert Bergen provides comment on this key Old Covenant passage; “For the New Testament Christian community, this verse was viewed as proof that Jesus was indeed the Messiah; God did indeed “raise up” Jesus (cf. Acts 2:30; 13:23), thus legitimizing him as the messianic son of David. The emphasis on an offspring/seed from David’s body links this covenant with the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gen. 15:4). As with David, so with the royal successor, the Lord would “establish his kingdom.”<sup>19</sup> This is the one “who has descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 1:3,4).

King David rejoiced in the promise that God would extend his kingdom through his offspring. Some interpreters have read into II Sam 7:19 an expressed understanding David had of the coming of the eternal King, the Lord Jesus Christ. Professor Kaiser, referring to II Sam. 7:19, explains, “It is at this point where one of the most sensational texts of Scripture appears, but unfortunately, it also happens to be one of the places where most translations go just plain haywire. Literally translated, David exclaims: “And this (which God had just declared about David’s house and future) is (or will be) the charter for humanity, O LORD God!” David instinctively knew what many modern readers of the text have a great deal of difficulty seeing: the son born to David would be one that God personally would be a Father to (II Sam. 7:14) and that this son would be the means of blessing all the nations and families of the earth.”<sup>20</sup> Later, in the book of Isaiah, the prophet uses similar language about the Servant of the Lord.

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<sup>19</sup> Bergen, Robert D., 1,2 Samuel (NAC 7; ed. (E. Ray Clendenen); Nashville: B&H Publishers, 1996), 340

<sup>20</sup> Kaiser, Walter, Jr. “The Great Commission in the Old Testament.” (Accessed Jan. 26, 2015).



“I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” Isaiah 42:6,7

The ESV uses the phrase “covenant for the people ” in Isaiah, which is very similar in language to David’s “charter for humanity.”<sup>21</sup> The context of the Isaiah passage clearly describes the role of the Lord Jesus, who is “a light for the nations.” He will “open the eyes that are blind.” Thus, we see the continued foundations for outreach and missions via the Davidic dynasty and God's significant initiatives and promises.

## **Psalms**

It is not unusual for a Psalmist to call the nations to enter the activity of praise to the God of Israel. Many Psalms find an obvious concern and desire for the nations beyond Israel. Dozens of Psalms could easily be cited. Psalm 67 serves as a classic example of the writer’s concern to bring glory to the God of Israel and to make His name known, not just in Israel, but to all the earth!

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God, O God; let all the peoples praise you” Psalm 67:1-3.

The Psalmist is deeply concerned in this Psalm for all the nations. Verse one is a prayer for blessing so that nations know God’s salvation! In addition, the Psalmist also desires that reverence and honor be given to the living God. The prophet Jeremiah expresses the heart of the Psalmist very well. “Who should not fear you, King of the nations? This is your due” (Jeremiah 10:7).<sup>22</sup> The Psalmist concludes Psalm 67 with this universal statement; “God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him!” Psalm 67:7.

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<sup>21</sup> Note that the ESV uses the phrase “instruction for mankind.”

<sup>22</sup> New International Version

Perhaps of all the Psalms that exhort the “whole earth” or the “nations” to praise and fear the God of Israel, the opening verse of Psalm 100 may be one of the best known. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, **all the earth**. Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!” Psalm 100:1,2. This is the language of the redeemed! Those saved by faith in God’s promised Saviour who walk in that faith desire others to enter that same joy and peace.

While the new covenant would undoubtedly bring the outpouring of God’s Spirit (Joel 2:28-32), it should never be thought that the old covenant saints did not have that same Holy Spirit within their hearts. A desire for the blessings of God upon others is the typical outworking of faith! Love for God, a zeal for his glory, and a desire for the good of souls are the very foundation for missions. Indeed, we learn from Psalms and other passages of the old covenant scriptures that many of God’s people shared these desires. The desire for the glory of God and the good of men’s souls is the heart of missionary activity!

While the universal texts in the Psalms pointing to all nations reveal that God’s salvation reaches the ends of the earth, it is essential to recognize that the nations were invited to share the blessings of Israel. In other words, God did not exclude Israel by offering blessings to the nations but instead asked the nations to join in Israel’s spiritual riches. Kostenberger and O’Brien are helpful on this matter. They write, “One cannot, however, understand, the teaching of the psalter about God’s salvation reaching the ends of the earth simply by turning to universalistic texts or isolated references to the nations. Rather, one must begin with Israel as God’s people, for although the nations are addressed and invited to turn to the Lord, the invitation is for them to share in the privileges of God’s chosen people.”<sup>23</sup> In summary, the Psalms reveal a place for the

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<sup>23</sup> Kostenberger and O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Missions* 50

nations as part of God's gracious plan of salvation. It is not, however, at the exclusion of God's covenant people.

## **The Servant of the LORD**

The prophet Isaiah introduces his readers to the Lord's "chosen servant." He writes, "Behold my servant, whom I behold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I will put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" Isaiah 42:1. This vital figure has a function related to both Israel and the nations of the earth. In their writing on the Lord's Servant, Kostenberger and O'Brien state that "one of the most important figures in the Old Testament whose role and ministry within the divine purposes had reference to both Israel and the nations is the Servant of Yahweh."<sup>24</sup> key passages in Isaiah's prophecy highlight the role and purpose of God's Servant.<sup>25</sup> Early in chapter forty-two, Isaiah provides a key purpose for the Servant. In doing so, we learn that the Servant will serve far beyond Israel.

"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people' a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" Isaiah 42:6,7

In this passage, we get some sense of the broad nature of the Servant's ministry. In his commentary on the book of Isaiah, J. Alec Motyer writes, "In the present passage, the Lord confirms the worldwide task of his servant and pledges its outcome."<sup>26</sup> It should also be noted that this worldwide emphasis is also revealed in verse one of the same chapter. There, the Servant will "bring forth justice to the nations" Isa. 42:1. This "light for the Gentiles" is, of course, fulfilled in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel writer Luke ties the Isaiah reference with the Lord Jesus, showing the Servant's two-fold task of serving Israel and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>25</sup> The four "Servant Songs" are found in Isa. 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, and 52:13-53:12.

<sup>26</sup> Motyer, J. Alec., *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1993), 321

the Gentile world. Luke records the devout Simeon's words after taking the baby Jesus into his arms.<sup>27</sup> Simeon proclaimed that Jesus would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" Luke 2:32.

Theologians often point out that the Servant's ministry in Isaiah's prophecy is directed towards Israel and then to the nations. This pattern resembles God's promise to Abraham<sup>28</sup> that the nations would be blessed through him. As in the covenant with Abraham, the Servant of God will be a source of blessing on a worldwide scale. Once again, we see foundations for mission activity built upon the promises towards Israel and the nations!

## **Summary**

The Old Testament reveals a present and eschatological hope as redemptive history unfolds. While asserting an intense missionary zeal demonstrated by covenant Israel in the Old Testament Scripture would be inaccurate, it is certain that the God of Israel extended his blessings beyond physical Israel.<sup>29</sup> This paper has attempted to show that the "nations" were held accountable to the Triune God, and His mercy extended to all who would come. The blessings of God from the early days of the biblical record were always intended to flow beyond Israel. Scripture is a record of redemptive history! This paper has attempted to show something of the historical redemptive framework, which ultimately leads to the coming of the "light of the Gentiles," the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph and Mary had taken the infant Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to partake in the purification rites required by the Law of Moses. See Luke 2:22,23

<sup>28</sup> "All peoples on the earth will be blessed through you" Genesis 12:3.

<sup>29</sup> Mission can be defined as a conscious and organized evangelical effort to convert others to the religion of Israel.

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